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Lays with the old force

E. Maxwell

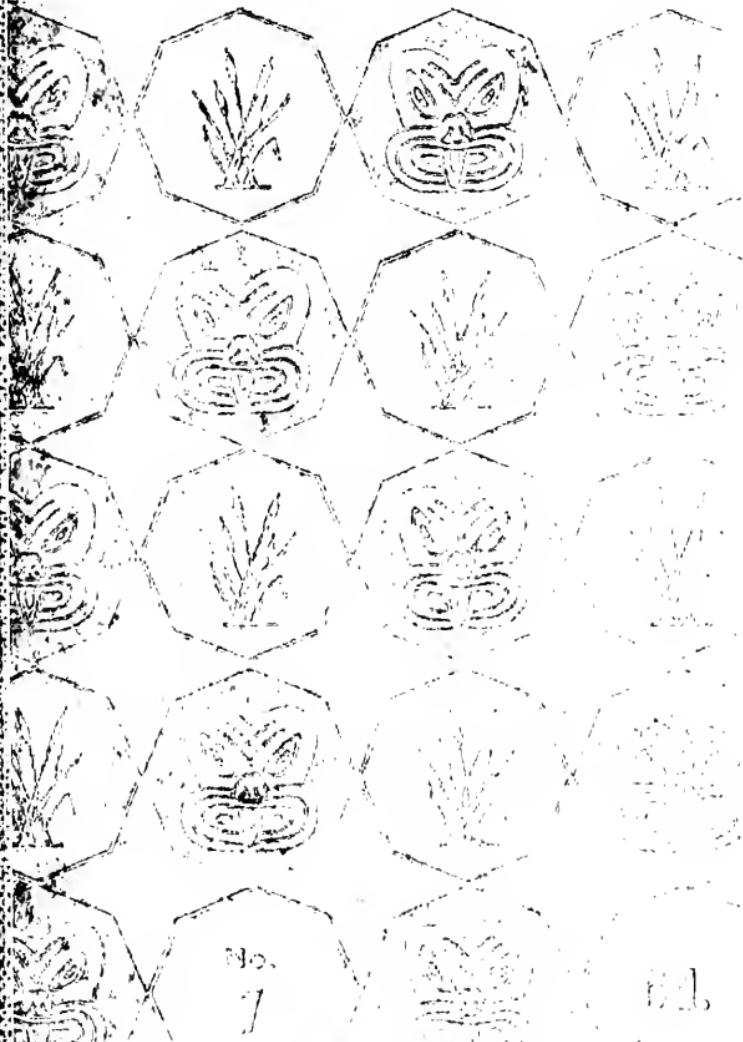


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DAYS WITH THE OLD FORCE

By E. MAXWELL





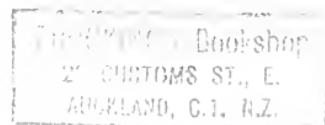
DAY'S WITH THE OLD FORCE.

From

"Recollections and Reflections of an old New Zealander."

by

E. MAXWELL



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NEW ZEALAND.



THE AUTHOR

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DAY'S WITH THE OLD FORCE.

I first went into an office when I was fourteen, and spent some years cooped up there. The latter part of the time I was in a law office, and I pined for the "wilds." Office life I hated heartily, for I was never happy unless out in the bush or the wilds, so there came a time when I took a step I never for a moment regretted.

An outbreak of trouble with the Maoris in Taranaki and a rushing of troops to the Front created the occasion of a chance for something more to my liking, and I promptly seized upon it. One morning I went to the office as usual and set to work, but about eleven o'clock some news came of the Maori disturbances and the urgent despatch of troops. I turned the key of my room at the office and went out to enquire, and I never went back, for within an hour I had joined the Force. I still have and treasure that key as an emblem of my escape to the open.

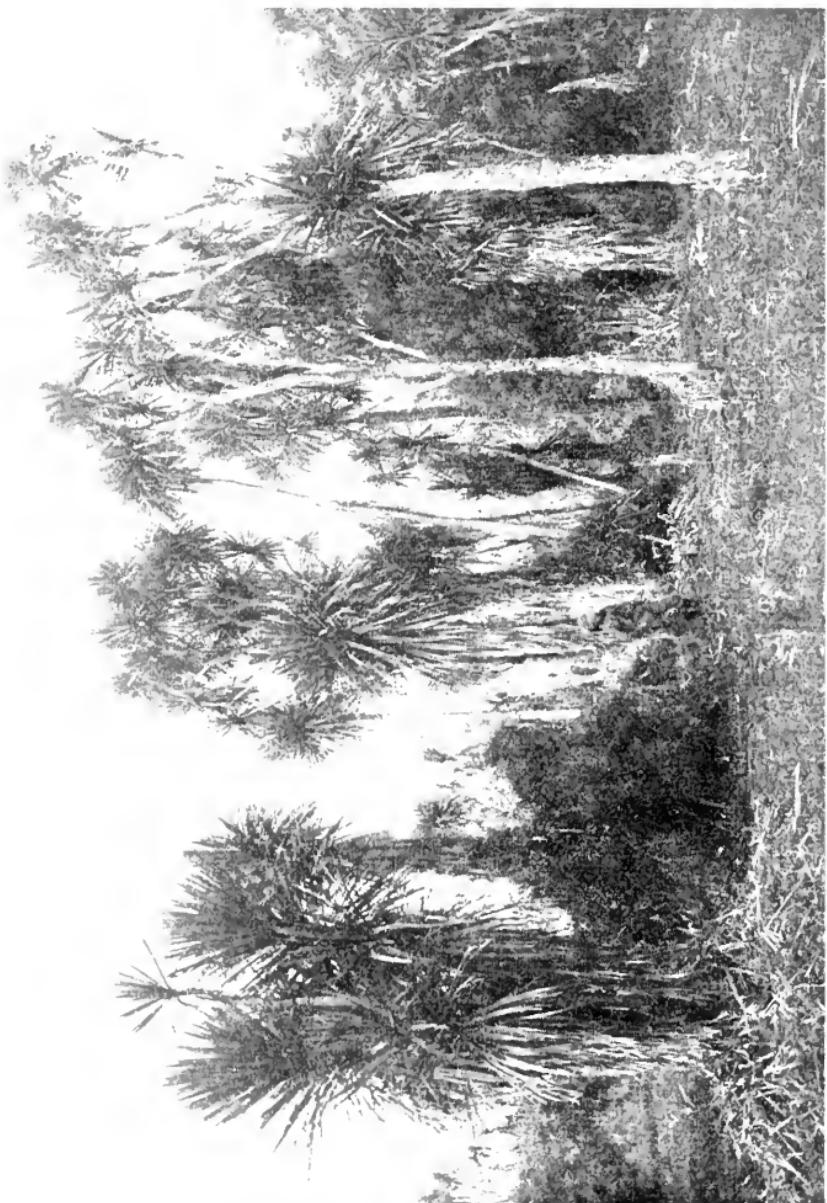
Of the seven years I had attached to the Old Force (I was for some years later in the Mounted Rifles, in which I was Major), I was four years in Taranaki, almost all of which time I was on the staff with Colonel Roberts. In addition, I had three months in charge of the guard at the Waiaua Bridge.

These four years I found most interesting in many ways, and I always looked back, and do so now, with unmixed satisfaction on my promptitude in seizing the opportunity to vitally change the course of my life, and almost equally so, on as promptly severing my connection when I realised that my duties were going to confine me to indoor town life again.

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BRITISH EMPIRE

CABBAGE TREES

Typical of the marginal area about Opunake District, 1870-1885.



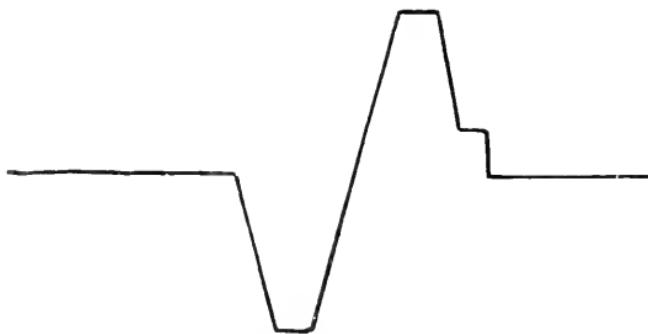
One great source of interest for me arose from the fact that all the country was practically in its virgin state, mostly untouched and untrodden by man. The coastal belt of this part of Taranaki was densely covered with tall flax, cabbage trees and scrub, or low bush, and all beyond, to the mountain and ranges and onward, was large dense bush. Through both areas were many rivers and streams and swampy patches, but no real swamps. Such country afforded a rich and delightful field for exploration and plant collection. My duties allowed me many opportunities in which to indulge my bent, and I took full advantage of them.

Opunake Redoubt and Encampment, where I was stationed, were on level ground. The Redoubt, cook-house, messrooms and roadway occupied the full width of the narrow neck between the edge of the cliff of Opunake Bay and the top of the slope down to the depression now occupied by the Hydro-electric lake. That depression—a wide bend in an old river course—used to be our camp gardens, potato field and oat field, the soil being rich river silt deposit and the place sheltered and under observation from the camp. This neck of land had a deep wide entrenchment right across it, with moat and parapet, one-half being on the south-east side of the redoubt.

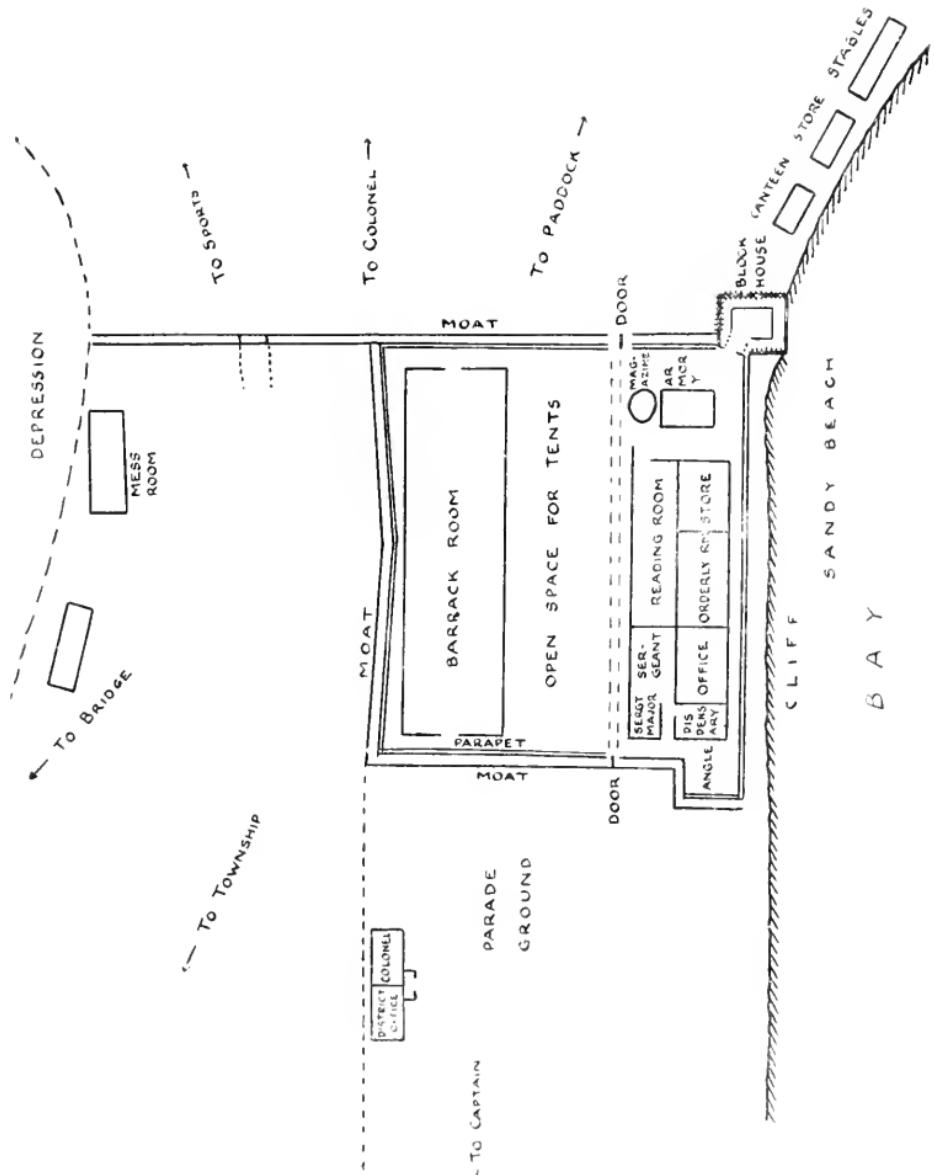
The present road to the beach was not made then, and the Redoubt was built close to the edge of the cliff, which was about eighty feet high. The old road to the beach was a very steep, narrow one, descending in the opposite direction, and reaching the bottom just opposite where the present one does. The Redoubt was in the main earthwork—in fact, in all but one corner deep moats, high parapets and blockhouse. The blockhouse covered two sides, that on the cliff edge and that on the south-east, being placed projecting almost its entire length and breadth beyond the alignment. It was strongly built, being double-walled with heavy planks, the wide space between the walls being filled with closely

packed shingle. It was loop-holed on three sides, about seven feet width of floor all round being raised from the central level on an incline, so that the men could fire through the loop-holes whilst lying down. It was used as one of the barrack rooms. At the west corner—that is the other corner against the cliff edge and on the north-west side, a small square of entrenchment—moat and parapet—projected, and from this the north-west side could be covered with rifle fire. This projection or angle, as it was called, was used as a look-out. The inland side from each corner inclined inwards slightly to the middle, and so each half could be covered by rifle fire from the other half.

The parapet was, as usual, some height above the ledge within, to permit the men manning it to fire over the top. The rough sketch below indicates the formation of the earthwork. On the next page is a rough sketch of the ground plan of the Redoubt, with buildings in it, and of the surroundings. As the sketch is from memory, it is not to scale.



As shown in the sketch, the district office was across the parade ground in the direction of where the township is now. The captain's house was still further on but nearer the cliff. In the district office Col. Roberts had his office, and in it was also the office of the district clerk and myself. On the other side (south-east) of the Redoubt was Col. Roberts' house, and along the edge of the cliff to the south were the canteen, fodder stores, stables,



etc. Beyond the Colonel's, right on to the Waiaua River were the horse paddocks, and immediately beyond the Colonel's house, and to the right were the sports grounds—football, la crosse, cricket pitch and tennis courts. Inside the Redoubt, right across the middle, there was a road, and a considerable open space for tents. On the inland side of this was a large barrack room, extending the full length of the Redoubt except for a pathway at each end. On the seaward side of the open space and roadway were various buildings, mostly under one roof—the library, Sergeants' room, Sergt.-Major's room in one line next the roadway; and in line on the seaward side, the dispensary, orderly room, an office and the stores room. The armoury was detached, and close by the armoury and the blockhouse was the underground magazine. There were heavy double-planked doors at each end, and a narrow plank, that could be lifted, across the moat at these doors. Both entrances could be covered by rifle fire, one from the blockhouse and the other from the angle.

The old road (track would be a more suitable term) kept as close to the sea as possible. At that time very little of the country any distance from the road was known, so that, when it was decided to make a road from Opunake to Stony River some distance inland from the old road, and Te Whiti stated emphatically that it was impossible to make a road from Opunake to Pungarahu, no one was in a position to contradict him. However, the road was made right through that piece of country and on to Stony River.

One of the somewhat annoying yet amusing experiences occurred on the part of the road going from the open land at Opua, through a very dense and heavy tongue of marginal bush that crossed the line of the road, to the Oaonui River and beyond. The road construction detachment had there to be protected by an armed party. They all marched from camp every morning, and back to camp in the evening. All day they

would be felling the trees, getting the stumps out, and dragging logs and stumps clear of the road, draining both sides, for most of it was very wet, and forming the road.

To the seaward, almost encircled by the bush, was a very considerable Maori kainga, and there were numbers of Maoris there, and at other places not far distant. As soon as the road party and armed escort were out of sight on their way to camp in the evening, the Maoris appeared and set hard at work dragging all the logs and stumps back again on to the formed road and into the ditches, and, in every way they could, undoing the day's work. This was done, partly as a protest, but, in truth, more as an entertainment. In later years some of the Maoris who had taken part in the entertainment told me a great deal about "the very good fun" they got out of it. They thought it a splendid joke, and one that lasted a long time—they took care to make it last as long as possible, and so did not mind working very hard to secure their fun. They told me that in the morning, before the road-making party appeared, they would go out and hide at the edge of the surrounding bush, and then watch unseen and thoroughly enjoy the half-assumed expressions of annoyance of the road-makers as they started to do the work over again, except the actual cutting, that they had done the day before. The Maoris told me also that at nights when assembled round the great fire in their kainga they would recount their exploits and add to the entertainment by mimicking the guard and road-party, repeating their remarks and such decorative language as had been used.

The kainga referred to was Te Ora. About a mile or more away, up against the edge of the bush at Opua, was the large pa or kainga of Wiremu Kingi Matakataea. He was getting an old man then, and I think it must be forty years and more since he died. The name of his pa was U'maroa.

The Maoris on the whole were a very good-natured happy people, and even in their more serious matters, even in fighting, there would be quite a lot of good nature displayed. Many things that any other people would have taken seriously they would view from the humorous side, and extract a lot of fun from them. Maoris could seldom, if ever, be appreciated or judged fairly from an English point of view. I remember very well, amongst others, one occasion on which the Maoris' good nature and sense of humour was in evidence. During the troubles associated with Te Whiti, large gatherings of Maoris took place at Parihaka from time to time. Great numbers would travel from the north and south, but mostly from the south, even from as far away as Wellington, to attend the big feasts, especially those held on 17th March and 17th September. Minor meetings were held on the 17th of each month. In the interests of safety the authorities were opposed to the number of Maoris at Parihaka being considerably increased, and with the object of preventing this as far as possible, a guard was placed on the bridge across the Waiaua River near Opunake. It was over this bridge only that the river could be crossed by drays, or that there was any clear road for numbers of persons to travel by, for just south of this there was a tongue of very wet flax and cabbage tree land through which there was no track. Further down the river the camp was astride the only road.

Small bodies of Maoris were allowed to cross and proceed if they possessed passes signed either by Capt. Good or Honi Pihama, which they could obtain if they could give sufficient assurance that they were peaceable travellers and would soon return to their own homes. On the other hand, those without passes, or even large parties with passes, were held up pending further investigation, which might result in their being turned back, or being allowed to proceed under certain conditions. Captain Good had gone through a lot of fighting during the sixties, and afterwards lived at Urunui. He



Bush within half a mile of the author's home in 1888. Typical of the high forest which covered all the inland country of Taranaki.

was the first to report to the authorities the White Cliffs massacre, and to take steps to prevent further trouble. Later he moved to Oeo, eight miles south of Opunake, where in partnership with Honi Pihama, he carried on farming.

The bridge guard was small, but the soldiers at the bridge and at the redoubt were in sight of each other, and if a strengthening of the guard, or assistance or instructions were required, they could be secured by signalling. Flags were used during the day and lights at night. The sentry at the redoubt was always on the look-out for these signals.

For three months I was in charge of the bridge guard, and I had quite an interesting time. Bodies of natives, sometimes few and sometimes many, came along every day. Generally they would be quite easily dealt with, being mostly good tempered and reasonable, but at times some would be bad tempered and defiant. On one occasion Titokowaru came with a large party and I anticipated trouble, but nothing happened. Tito, as he was always called by us, was one of the worst type of Hau Hau, and was responsible for many fights and disturbances. He was the leader at Te-ngutu-o-te-Manu on the disastrous occasion when Major Von Tempsky and so many others were ambushed and killed, and where Col. Roberts showed such conspicuous bravery and ability and gained the Cross. Tito had lost one eye, some years before the later time I write about, at an engagement in North Taranaki. He was the ugliest and most villainous looking Maori I ever saw, and his blind eye added much to his lack of favour in looks. He, of Taranaki, and Te Kooti, of the East Coast, have been coupled as a pair that gave more trouble than any others, but of the two I certainly think Titokowaru was the worst.

On one occasion a large body of Maoris, some two hundred or more, arrived at the bridge on their way to Parihaka, taking with them one hundred drays laden

with provisions for a great feast there on the 17th March. The provisions consisted of potatoes, kumaras, kumi-kumis (a sort of hard long pumpkin, with the skin deeply ribbed—kumi-kumi is the Maori name for pumpkin), corn, and great numbers of pigs already dressed—and very well dressed—ready for cooking. Each dray was well filled with kits of potatoes and kumaras and other things, and then on top of all, three of four or more pigs, and as there were a hundred drays, the supplies were immense. They came along somewhere about midday, doubtless expecting to reach Parihaka that night or in the forenoon of the next day, but of course, being in such numbers and having all these provisions, they were held up and we had to hold them there all night and much of the following day. We had of course, immediately on the appearance of the head of the column, signalled for reinforcements and instructions. Later we allowed them to cross the bridge and camp on a piece of level ground down near the river where we could keep a better watch over them.

They took their enforced detention in excellent part, though it was so exceedingly upsetting to their plans, and turned it into a night of merriment and general sport. As we mounted guard in a position above their camp, they mounted guard also over their drays and provisions. Then on each occasion, as the guard was changed throughout the night they would do likewise, mimicking the commands exactly in perfect copy of the English in words and in tone of military command. This performance caused endless merriment and shrieks of delight throughout their camp. They of course had all their womenfolk with them. It was a fine clear night, and they spent the whole of it in almost ceaseless merriment, and we knew well that we were the butt of much good-natured fun. Every now and again some of them would come up and condole with us for being out of it, making suggestions as to how we could, according to their ideas, have a much better time, and seeming not to see, or then pretending not to see, why

we didn't fall in with their ideas. The Maori is, or I should say, was, an interesting mixture of simple good nature, natural frankness and shrewdness.

We had many horses, of course. Doubtless on account of the manner of breaking (if breaking it could be called), most of them were exceedingly hard to catch. Except under certain conditions privately owned horses were not allowed in the station horse paddocks, and while there were lots of grounds round about with good feed amongst the flax, there were no fences, consequently tether ropes were a necessary possession to the owner of a horse. Every now and again a horse and its tether rope would be missing. A few days later a Maori would wander up to you and after a time, in an inconsequent way, would say, "you lose the horse," and if you assented, the next would be, "How much you give pose I find him?" If you came to terms, which you would have to if you wanted to see your horse again, in the course of a few days—after a supposed search—your horse would be brought to you, but never the rope. If your horse disappeared with the saddle and the tether rope, you could by the same process—generally the promise of 10/- or even a £1—recover your horse, but never the saddle or rope. The tall flax gave far too much cover, which enabled your friend the Maori to first loose your horse plus the rope, and then in a casual way see that it went further into the flax, and ultimately take it up to the edge of the bush behind some pa, to await being "found" again after the terms of finding had been arranged. The game was quite well understood by both parties, but both equally understood that, short of a red-handed exposure, it "was not the thing" to do other than pretend ignorance. But in the event of an unavoidable exposure, the Maori would just grin and expect you to enjoy the joke as well as he did.

Some miles of the Opunake-Eltham road, from the main road up, was made by a road-making detachment from Opunake. During the first part, they worked



A MAGNIFICENT RATA TREE, MAUNGAROA RIVER.

from Opunake, and later from a temporary camp established on a river flat about two miles up. Whilst work was being carried on at the lower end, some thirty to forty men marched out every morning and back at night, carrying their picks and shovels. At that time the track led through the tall flax close to the edge of the bank of the depression which is now the Hydro-electric lake. Some of the married sergeants were quartered in whares that were built along this bank, and just over the edge. They were built in excavations, so that the lower edge of the sloping roof of each was level with the top of the bank, and about three or four feet away from it. The furthest along the bank from the Redoubt was a long and strong one—fortunately so as it turned out.

As before mentioned, there was between the tall bush and the sea a coastal belt of flax, cabbage tree and scrub-covered land. It is described as open land to distinguish it from that covered with big heavy bush. About Opunake this belt was about two miles wide, and into it came numbers of cattle and wild pigs of the "Captain Cook" type, many of them grizzly monsters.

One evening as three of us were coming up from the bridge along the track through the flax, and as we were near the large whare, out from the flax rushed a savage monster "Captain Cook" boar. It had evidently been hunted by dogs and was absolutely recklessly mad. We had just time to escape his rush by making a dash for the whare and springing on the roof, where we got astride the ridge. We had escaped him for the time being, but the boar took up a position at the end of the whare, and on the slightest provocation he made savage attempts at attack.

Very shortly, along came one or two of the leaders of the road-making party on their way back to camp. Of course when they saw the three of us sitting straddle-legged on the ridge pole, they at once commenced a good deal of raillery, and continued as they approached. We took it all in good part, while "laying low" as to the

reason for our peculiar position. Very soon they became only too well aware of it, for Mr. Boar promptly joined in the fun, and it became a question who would reach the end of the bank first. The men won, however, and with a mighty dash took up their position along with us astride the ridge pole, with their picks and shovels over their shoulders. As party after party came along, the whole programme was repeated each time, until the ridge pole bristled with picks and shovels. We learned later that the whole performance of the men's actions had been observed by the Captain from the angle or look-out where he spent a good deal of his time, but he did not know the cause, because the boar was below the line of sight. He called the Sergt.-Major to explain the situation, but as the distance was several hundred yards, neither of them could make it out, and the Sergt.-Major was told to send a man out to enquire. The road party being still out, the only men left in the Redoubt who could well be used in the capacity of messenger were the members of the guard and the librarian. The librarian was of course the one to be used before one of the guard would be taken. Now the librarian was one, Billy, the wag of the camp. He really was quite an institution, a downright funny fellow, bubbling over with wit with an exceedingly quaint twist in it, which was always accentuated by his irresistibly funny mannerisms and expression, and an extraordinary facility in mimicking. Well, "Billy the Wag" was despatched, and as soon as he came within hearing he gave an exact reproduction in tone and manner of the Sergt.-Major's orders. Then we were entertained with a very full exercise of his raillery and wit, for the display of which the occasion offered an excellent opportunity. We enjoyed all this extra thoroughly, knowing what the sequel would be. That sequel arrived with extreme suddenness, for, amidst a roar from the boar and a wild yell from "Billy the Wag," he hurled himself into the midst of us with such vigour that some were nearly knocked from their perch down the other side. Both the Captain and the

Sergt.-Major had a proper sense of dignity and quite a fair share each of temper, and they could not of course tolerate such a flagrant flouting of their orders. A member of the guard was promptly called, and in so peremptory a tone that he seized his rifle in great haste and received orders to "go out and bring these men in at once," which sounded very much like an order to arrest the lot of us. "Billy the Wag" did all the talking for the party, and the member of the guard knew a lot more about things in general, and more particularly about himself and what he looked like marching out with his rifle, than he had ever known before. No doubt he was so much taken up with wondering how he could "get back" on Billy that of all the arrivals his was closest to disaster. Instead of his arresting us, our friend "Captain Cook" with a rush and a roar, and foaming at the mouth, added the member of the guard to his line of prisoners. The ridge pole was now pretty full, and sported a rifle among the many picks and shovels, and the shouts of delight must have been well heard by the Captain, the Sergt.-Major and all in camp, including the cooks and cook orderlies who were wondering when the men were coming.

However, we realised that no joke could be so good that it could not be overdone. Tearing the long pole, that held the thatch, off the roof, the boar was in time worried round the far side of the whare, and the party made its escape by going a few at a time whilst the remainder entertained "Captain Cook." The last one waited for a favourable opportunity, and then made quick time to the station.

The following day a tragedy nearly happened. A sister of the Captain was walking along the track from the station when the boar rushed out to attack her. Two men were fairly near, and though they made a dash to her assistance they would probably have been too late, for these animals, great things as they were, were extraordinarily swift in attack, but the thing that saved her

was that the boar was evidently confused by the lady's voluminous waving skirts, and he faltered in his rush. A party was sent immediately, and after considerable trouble and excitement, the boar was shot. A really big old Captain Cook boar was by no means a nice customer, nor was he easy to dispatch where there was plenty of cover.

Of wild cattle I had several experiences about that time, and later. One of these was not very long after the bridge south of Opunake was built—the one after the Waiana. One moonlight night I was walking down the road near the Mangahume when three bulls came out of the flax and immediately started after me. I did a very quick sprint of fifty yards or so down through the cutting to the bridge. All the way I felt a sensation as though a pair of horns were about to heave me up. I just managed to get through the side of the bridge on to one of the projections as the bulls dashed across the bridge. They kept me there till early morning, for as soon as I came out on to the bridge, one or the other would see me and give me enough warning to make retreat to safety seem advisable. At last I got away and reached camp very ready for breakfast, and feeling that I had had enough of wild bulls when unarmed. Shortly after this experience three bulls, doubtless the same three and very near the same place, attacked a team of bullocks in a dray driven by one Exley. They turned the dray over, but the bullock driver escaped to live very many years, by getting under the upturned dray. Two of the bullocks were killed, I believe, but what happened to the rest I do not remember, for it was fifty or more years ago.

A few years later I had another night-long experience with a bull, this time in the Oaomii district north of Opunake. For some reason which I cannot now recollect, I was separated from my horse and gun—perhaps I was securing a shot porker—when suddenly a wild bull appeared. He immediately made things distinctly lively. Fortunately there were tall flax bushes

Publicity Photo

THE SIGHTLINE, OF TARANAKI.



and big cabbage trees all round. The former gave me a chance of dodging, and the latter a chance of sanctuary. I was soon up a nice stout cabbage tree with strong spreading branches which afforded a safe and comfortable retreat. But again, as in the case of the three bulls at the bridge, though safe, it proved wearisome, for it lasted the whole night. Each time I attempted to get to my horse, the bull, even though grazing some distance away always appeared too soon for me to find my horse. As on the former occasion, however, daylight brought the time of release. These wild cattle always seemed to like to get away to either the bush or the dense scrub, during daylight, probably on account of being hunted much of which from time to time I did myself.

On another occasion I was chased by a cow which was certainly very savage, if not mad, and on that occasion my only chance of escape was an over-slim though tall cabbage tree. I had succeeded in reaching it and in getting up several feet when she struck it with such force that my hold was loosened, and down I came on to her head, and immediately got an impromptu "leg-up" again.

Ration supplies to all the stations were under contract, and the allowance was distinctly on the meagre side. As a consequence purchases of "extras" had to be made by the messes, but even then no chance by which further additions might be made by foraging was missed. This led to all sorts of adventures including not a little breaking of bounds and enough risk of one sort and another to lend added spice.

At Opunake station, besides the station limits to all not on pass, there were outer bounds. These were the Waiaua River and the Te Ngamu, or more correctly, the Otahi stream, beyond which no one, even on pass, unless on holiday leave, was allowed to go. But it was ordinarily only beyond these bounds that there was any reasonable chance of securing substantial additions to

the ordinary mess fare. Beyond these bounds were duck of various kinds, pigeons, peaches, and pigs and cattle in plenty, and consequently some of us would take the risks attendant on going out of bounds—trouble with the natives and trouble in camp. As I had a very fleet horse and was a good hunting shot from the saddle, and as I was on the staff with more liberty and less chance of my absence involving consequences, I made many exciting trips, most of them resulting in substantial bags.

I generally made my way up-coast, as in that direction the nature of the country was more favourable to hard riding, which included hasty flight, and in these raids this course was a very distinct exemplification of "he who runs away lives to fight (or forage) another day." Besides plenty of duck in the streams near the bush, and plenty of pigeons in it, there were groves of luscious peaches and cherries in the bays along the margin. I filled many a flour bag with them without getting off my horse, but fat porkers were much more prized than any of these, and my most happy hunting ground was the more open parts down near the sand-hills further up coast. There the porkers were fat and in plenty, and the flax was in large tall clumps giving excellent cover. It was not too close to prevent my catching sight of and shooting the game, or for hard riding. The latter was the most important, as there was a large pa inland at the edge of the bush, and the situation held all the chances of much excitement.

My modus operandi was to sight a cluster of pigs in which there were some medium-sized fat porkers. I would then work round through the flax until I had got the pigs between me and the station—the distance would be about three miles to outer bounds—shoot my porker from the saddle and, while it was still kicking, pick it up if I could manage to do so from the saddle at the canter, and then trust to the speed of my good horse, to luck, and the cover of the tall flax to do the

rest. The sound of my gun would of course bring a mob of mounted Maoris galloping down from the pa on to the scene in quick time, and a wild and exciting chase would follow. Though there might be heard the beat of horses' hoofs, and wild yells everywhere, it would be hoped that the pursuers would fail to get a good sight of the fugitive. It simply would not have done to have been effectively seen, much less caught, or even traced, for it would have meant not only an end to all such sport, but also an end of all connection with the Force, so I resorted to many devices. Among these would be the keeping clear of the usual tracks, changing direction if this could be done without detection, suddenly doubling into a thicket and allowing the storm of pursuit to pass by—fortunately they always made so much noise that none of my movements would be likely to be heard—making an extensive circuit and arriving at the station from the opposite direction, possibly in somewhat different garb, perhaps on a different horse, anyway always without rifle and porker, which could be recovered later. And so, on approaching the station from, say, the south, as likely as not would be seen several excited Maoris guarding the approaches from the north. You would naturally go to them and ask what all the trouble was, and on being told you would advise spreading out a bit and the keeping of a careful and continued watch. The approach of night always put an end to this, for the Maoris liked not the dark when away from their kaingas.



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